



Pick Your Path to Health

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Silence isn't always golden, especially when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). But for many Asian women, private matters such as STDs stay private, and some Asian women never talk to their doctors about sexual health. Yet, one frank talk with your doctor can make all the difference between staying healthy and dealing with a complicated illness.

STDs are infections caused by viruses or bacteria that you can get by having sex. There are more than 25 different types of STDs, and 15 million people are infected each year.

Knowledge Plus Action Equals Protection

When it comes to protecting yourself from STDs, knowledge is your most powerful weapon, but only if you use it!

"Many Asian and Pacific Islander women receive no information regarding safe sexual practices," explains Rita Wong, a community health worker with the HIV/AIDS program at the Asian Health Services in Oakland, CA. "In the course of a 'normal sex life,' an Asian or Pacific Islander woman would not go to the gynecologist." Many of these women often first go to the gynecologist at menopause, decades after STDs are at the highest rate in women.

If at first you're not comfortable discussing your sexual health with your doctor, remember your discussions will remain private and with time you will feel more at ease. The payoff is big. You may avoid serious health problems.

Women and STDs: An Unfair Disadvantage

As a woman, you have even more reasons to break the silence and talk with your doctor. Women are physically more vulnerable to infections. For example, in a single act of intercourse the chance of a woman contracting gonorrhea from a man may be as high as 60 to 90 percent. On the other hand, the likelihood of a man contracting gonorrhea from an infected partner in a single sexual act is about 20 to 30 percent. And you'll be surprised to know that many women who have STDs don't have symptoms so they don't know they are infected. When diagnosed and treated early,

many STDs can be treated effectively. This is especially important for women, because they suffer more serious and more frequent complications from STDs.

Practicing Prevention

"Preventative medicine is not highly practiced among Asian and Pacific Islander women," says Wong. "Women do not go to the doctor for regular physical exams, so they have no real concept of preventative health."

Regular exams not only help to identify STDs at an early stage, they can also protect against cervical cancer. Wong explains that cervical cancer is often caught in late stages in Asian and Pacific Islander women because they do not see the importance of regular examinations until later in life.

Abstinence or having sex with a mutually faithful, uninfected partner are the only ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. For anyone who is sexually active, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases recommends:

- Have regular checkups for STDs even in the absence of symptoms, and especially if having sex with a new partner. These tests can be done during a routine visit to the doctor's office.
- Learn the common symptoms of STDs. Seek medical help immediately if any suspicious symptoms develop, even if they are mild.
- Avoid douching because it removes some of the normal protective bacteria in the vagina and increases the risk of getting some STDs.

The younger you are when you have sex for the first time, the more likely you are to develop an STD during your lifetime, and the chance of contracting an STD increases with the number of sexual partners you have over a lifetime.

Steps to Better Health

- Insist that your partner practice safe sex and get routine check-ups.
- Visit a gynecologist that speaks your native language. The larger the language barrier, the less likely a woman is to visit the gynecologist, explains Rita Wong.
- Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's hotline for anonymous, confidential information on STDs and how to prevent

them. It also provides referrals to clinical and other services in your community. Call toll-free at 1-800-227-8922.

- Learn more about STDs and their symptoms at:
<http://www.4woman.gov>, <http://www.ashastd.org>, and
<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/factsheets/stdinfo.htm>

Take care of your sexual health, and you'll be on a path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."